

Mental Health: Cultivating Purpose



There are many ways to take care of your mental health, one of which is to cultivate a sense of purpose. People with a strong sense of purpose are better at dealing with stressors and are less prone to experiencing emotional swings in response to life's ups and downs.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A SENSE OF PURPOSE?

To have a sense of purpose is to have direction and goals in life based on important personal values. Decisions made and actions taken based on a sense of purpose feel meaningful and satisfying. While purpose often focuses outside the self (on helping others, for example), it doesn't have to be a world-changing ambition. You might feel sense of purpose in being creative, engaging in day-to-day tasks (like cleaning or cooking), or striving to be the best version of yourself. The key to purpose is that it is important to you and rooted in your values, and acting with your purpose brings you satisfaction, joy, and feelings of fulfillment.

HOW IS HAVING A SENSE OF PURPOSE DIFFERENT FROM HAVING GOALS OR FINDING MEANING?

- Purpose is an overriding sense of direction as you move through life, make decisions, and consider your future. Purpose doesn't have an endpoint. It's like a compass that continues to guide you.
- Goals, on the other hand, are objectives that can be accomplished. To the extent that your goals are tied to your values and your sense of purpose, you're likely to gain deeper satisfaction from reaching them.
- The search for meaning is a reflective activity, a way of making sense of and feeling comfortable in the world. You might feel a sense of meaning if the world seems understandable to you, you believe that you matter, and you have clear long-term goals or a sense of purpose. You might also find meaning in appreciating the small things in life and the wonders and beauties of your surroundings.

HOW CAN YOU CULTIVATE A SENSE OF PURPOSE?

Most people don't simply "find" a sense of purpose. Cultivating a sense of purpose is a lifelong activity. Your purpose might shift in large or small ways as your roles and focus change through the years. Sometimes a sense of purpose can emerge in reaction to a disturbing experience. Here are some ways to understand and cultivate your sense of purpose:

- **START WITH YOUR VALUES.** Your purpose is based on your personal values, so a good place to start is to explore and clarify your most important values. Values are things like kindness, independence, honesty, generosity, wisdom, courage, loyalty, security, and fairness. You might do this by looking at a list of values (which are easy to find online), noting the ones that resonate with you and narrowing that set down to the five to ten that feel most important to you. You might also explore your values through writing, by keeping a journal of your experiences and your emotional reactions to them.
- **THINK ABOUT WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY.** What activities or experiences in your life make you happy? What has given you feelings of personal satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment in the past? If you had no responsibilities, how would you spend your time? The answers to these questions can be clues to both your passions and your values and can help you recognize your purpose.
- **TRY NEW EXPERIENCES.** Experiment with new activities by taking a class, volunteering, joining a group related to a personal interest, or trying your hand at a new pursuit or hobby. Engaging with new people or a new activity can open your eyes to interests and passions and set you on a path toward exploring them more deeply.
- **PAY ATTENTION WHEN ACCOMPLISHMENTS LEAVE YOU FEELING EMPTY AND UNFULFILLED.** If your goals or your work aren't aligned with your values and purpose, even significant accomplishments can feel unrewarding. Pay attention when this happens, as it might help you find ways to focus at least some of your time and energy on activities that are more important to you.
- **UNDERSTAND THAT YOUR PURPOSE CAN CHANGE.** Significant life changes, like graduating from school, changing careers, having or adopting children, or retiring can lead you to reexamine your values and priorities and shift the focus of your sense of purpose. That's one reason these transitions can be so difficult and confusing. A sense of purpose that was tied to a particular role in life may no longer be useful as a guide when that role ends. A traumatic experience, a significant illness, or the death of a loved one can also cause you to re-examine your values and shift your purpose.
- **SEEK HELP.** A professional counselor from your employee assistance program (EAP) can help you clarify your values and cultivate a sense of purpose.

For more information:

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